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SUBJECT: IRELAND'S DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER RESIGNS
UNEXPECTEDLY

¶1. (U) On September 7, Ireland's first female Deputy Prime Minister (Tanaiste), Mary Harney, unexpectedly resigned as leader of the Progressive Democrats (PD) party, the center-right, minor partner in the governing coalition led by the Fianna Fail party. Harney had been PD leader for nearly 13 years and had held the Tanaiste's post for the past 9, during which time she also served successively as Minister for Enterprise, Trade, and Employment and, during the past 2 years, as Minister for Health and Children. Her resignation followed upon a public row in early summer with PD colleague and Minister for Justice, Equality, and Law Reform, Michael McDowell, who had pushed for Harney to stand aside as party leader. Harney, however, had appeared to consolidate her hold on the party mantle during a PD parliamentary meeting in late June that positioned her to lead the party into the expected spring/summer 2007 general elections.

¶2. (U) In announcing her resignation, Harney said that she had not been pressured to step down, and she noted her intention to run again for her Dublin-area parliamentary seat in the upcoming campaign. She also expressed her intention to retain her position as Health Minister, subject to the consent of the Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Bertie Ahern and new PD leader, who will become Tanaiste. Nominations for candidates to stand in the yet unscheduled PD leadership election are due September 11, with Justice Minister McDowell the presumptive front-runner.

¶3. (U) Harney's decision fostered heavy speculation as to the implications of her resignation for the governing coalition. Prime Minister Ahern told the press that he would seek immediate assurances from the new PD leader to remain in government with Fianna Fail up to the elections, completing the coalition's five-year term. (Of the Parliament's 166 seats, the PDs have 8 seats, compared to Fianna Fail's 77; under an earlier electoral pact with Fianna Fail, the PDs have been given the Tanaiste's slot, two cabinet minister positions, and two minister of state (junior minister) posts.) In remarks to the press, McDowell promised to announce shortly his intentions as to the party leadership, and he praised Harney as the "most spectacularly successful employment minister in Western Europe." Labour Party leader Pat Rabbitte commented to the press, however, that Harney's departure had left the PD party a "dysfunctional minor partner in Government" and that the country should fear the consequences of McDowell becoming Tanaiste.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Harney, who, at 24, was the youngest person ever to serve in the Irish Seanad (Senate) and is a strongly pro-American former participant in the International Visitors Program, resigned most likely out of fatigue and in the interests of strengthening the PDs ahead of the 2007 elections. Ireland's troubled health care system is conspicuously out of step with the country's rapid economic

rise, and, in her position as Health Minister, Harney has faced bureaucratic resistance and public criticism in her largely unsuccessful attempts to address the system's inadequacies. Relinquishing the PD leadership and Tanaiste duties will enable Harney to focus more on her health portfolio ahead of the 2007 election campaign, in which health system issues will loom large. Her resignation also likely reflected her desire to re-energize the PD party before the election campaign begins in earnest. Several polls since January have predicted that PD candidates will only secure three percent of the vote, and these anemic numbers underpinned Minister McDowell's push for Harney's resignation in early summer. As the party's driving intellectual force and most colorful figure, McDowell is probably the party's best remaining hope to enlarge membership and to improve upon its polling numbers. Licensed betting shops already have McDowell as the favorite to succeed Harney, well ahead of PD parliamentarian Liz O'Donnell. A key question, however, is how well Prime Minister Ahern would be able to work with the outspoken, sometimes divisive McDowell in carrying forward the coalition's program of government through the remainder of its term.

BENTON